There are several different piyyutim that all have a refrain of imru leilohim, “Say to God.” This one is customarily recited in the Eastern European rite before Unetanah Tokef in Musaf for Yom Kippur. It is ascribed to Rabbi Meshullam ben Kalonymus (10th–11th centuries, Italy and Germany), one of the great pioneers of Ashkenazic piyyut.

The poem serves as an extended elaboration or midrash on King Solomon’s prayer dedicating the First Temple (1 Chronicles 16:8–36). Each stanza opens with the words “Say to God,” followed by four rhymed lines of three or four beats each. Each stanza then concludes with a quotation from Solomon’s prayer, in sequence.

This tight construction, frequently including alliteration, creates an almost musical effect—which may be a source of its popularity—but often forces the ideas into a constricted pattern. Although the original poem formed a complete alphabetical acrostic (including doubling the letters that have a different written form), the general custom is to recite only the first ten and the final two stanzas.

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The first line, following the introductory word u-v’khen (“and so”), is taken from Psalm 61:3: “Say to God: How awe-inspiring are Your works!” As we recite the phrase imru leilohim (“Say to God”) throughout the poem, we might also have this phrase from psalms in mind.

As noted above, this oft-quoted verse is from Solomon’s prayer dedicating the Temple, found at 1 Chronicles 16:8.

Part of the same prayer of Solomon quoted above, 1 Chronicles 16:9.

The thought of the poet is that the forgiveness of sin will lead to messianic redemption and the re-establishment of the Temple.

The continuation of Solomon’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 16:9.
IMRU LEILOHIM

And so, say to God:
How awe-inspiring are Your works!

Say to God:
God, sovereign in Your kingdom,
hasten the redemption of Your people,
fulfilling Your promise
that forgiveness is Yours.
  Thank ADONAI, calling out God’s name.

Say to God:
You are blessed and praised in Your greatness,
quick to forgive Your congregation,
show Your greatness to all,
as when You measured out the seas.
  Sing unto God, raise up Your voices to God.

Say to God:
Redeemer of Your holy people,
sanctify them through forgiveness.
Establish the Holy Temple
for the the descendants of Abraham dedicated to You.
  Exult the holy name of God.
Jeremiah 16:19 refers to God as uzi u-ma∙uzi, “my strength and my strong-hold.” The poet considers that stronghold to be the Torah given by God.

1 Chronicles 16:11.

REMEMBER זוֹרֵר. 1 Chronicles 16:12.

YOUR SERVANT עַבְדוּ. In Isaiah 44:26, God promises the fulfillment of the promise to God’s servants that Zion will be restored.

1 Chronicles 16:13.

YOU אָֽהַּ. 1 Chronicles 16:14.

YOUR HOME לְבֵיתוֹ. The Jerusalem on earth and the Jerusalem in heaven are exactly parallel. The Temple on earth is the mirror and the place of God’s dwelling.

1 Chronicles 16:15.

REMEMBER זוֹרֵר. 1 Chronicles 16:16.
Say to God:
Singular One, praised in Your mighty heavens,
who forgives this people on this day,
as You promised by Your mighty word.
So, God’s mighty people,
seek Adonai and offer up praise.

Say to God:
You, who created everything through Your word,
fashioned it and made it,
forgive this impoverished nation.
And you, whose faith is in God,
remember the wonders that God has wrought.

Say to God:
You, who fulfills the promise of Your servant, the prophet,
and whose glory is in the heavens and on earth—
forgive the people devoted to You,
called in Your Holy Writ
“the descendants of Israel, God’s servant.”

Say to God:
You, who formed the earth
and dwell beyond the horizons of earth,
forgive this unique people on earth.
So say to God, who established the earth,
You are Adonai, our God, the Divinity of all the earth.

Say to God:
You, who dwell in the secret places of heaven,
Compassionate One, full of compassion for Your flock—
in Your mercy, return to Your home.
And you, who have joined God’s covenant:
Remember always God’s covenant.
THE COVENANT
1 Chronicles 16:16. The pledge is that Israel will be the eternal people. Thus, the very young of Israel can be assured that the Jewish people will not die out.

MOSES
The Hebrew simply says “shepherd” without providing his name. Moses was in fact a shepherd and metaphorically can be said to have shepherded his people; he is told that God will forgive sins on Yom Kippur. Some take the reference as pointing to Abraham, who is promised that God will redeem Israel.

INSCRIBED
1 Chronicles 16:17. More literally “established,” but here translated as “inscribed” in order to capture the word repetition in Hebrew.

FAITHFUL
The word tamim is used in the Bible to describe human behavior, those who are honest, true, whole. Here the poet uses this ideal human characteristic to describe God.

AND SO WE SAY
1 Chronicles 16:35.

RESOLUTE
As noted above, almost all congregations skip the intervening stanzas between yod and tav.

ETERNALLY
There can be both a spatial and temporal meaning to the Hebrew word olam. Thus the phrase might also mean: Praise God in heaven and on earth.

1 Chronicles 16:1-36.

 Supplement to the Rabbinical Assembly Maḥzor Lev Shalem. Translation and commentary by Rabbi Edward Feld, senior editor.
Say to God:
Children of God's estate,
young sheep of God's inheritance,
may God fulfill for you the promise
recorded in the Torah,
contracted and pledged to Abraham and his descendants.

Say to God:
You, whose good counsel is inscribed as law,
inscribe the righteous for life.
Forgive the violations inscribed by sin,
as Moses the shepherd was told in ancient times,
and was inscribed for Jacob as an eternal covenant.

Say to God:
Our God of salvation, You are faithful.
You shall save us from suffering
and forgive the sins we have committed.
You hear our prayers,
and so we say: Save us, God of our salvation.

Say to God:
The Eternal God is resolute;
God's word is established forever.
Though God is hidden from us all
we praise God's name to the end of time:
   Praised be the name of the God of Israel ever and ever.